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AIRPOWER
IN
SMALL WARS

The British
Air Control Experience

by
Lieutenant Colonel
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Lieutenant Colonel David J. Dean

Air University (AU)
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Perhaps the most visible uses of American military forces in recent years have been in deploying US Army forces as part of the Sinai Constabulary Mission and sending US Marines to Lebanon. In both instances, the mission of these forces is not victory in a war-fighting situation but peacekeeping through constabulary or police activity. The essential difference between war-fighting and peacekeeping missions is that the former makes the maximum use of force while the latter is committed to the minimum use of force. The growing importance of a peacekeeping role for armed forces was predicted by Morris Janowitz more than 20 years ago; the decade of the eighties is showing the prescience of that prediction.¹

The constabulary role of the military is one of many roles falling at the lower end of the conflict spectrum, that area tainted by the early Vietnam experience. Roles in these categories would include assisting Third World friends and intervening in small wars with advisers or with small, highly trained fighting units. It is an area in which today's US Air Force seems to have little role. As it has increasingly concentrated on its strategic nuclear mission and its role in the high-tech, high-intensity Central Front NATO-Warsaw Pact conflict scenario, the capability of the Air Force to participate in small wars has correspondingly declined.² It may be time to examine the relevance of US air power to the small wars that flare up so often in the Third World and which may involve a vital US interest requiring a military response. The British experience with air control between World Wars I and II demonstrates that air power was once effective in a constabulary and small-war situation. That experience points out

how air power, in the hands of creative strategists, can be shaped and applied to support a government's most trying political responsibilities.

Genesis of Air Control

The official British definition of air control, circa 1933, noted that political administration of undeveloped countries rests, in the last resort, on military force. Air control implied that control is applied by aircraft as the primary arm, usually supplemented by forces on the ground, according to particular requirements.³ How did the Royal Air Force come to be the dominant arm in colonial control? What doctrine did they develop to guide operations in the wilds of the empire? What impact did air control have on the development of the Royal Air Force?

British air control resulted from political and military necessity. Emerging victorious but exhausted from World War I, Britain had to deal with restive populations and disorders of all sorts in its empire. Uprisings against British rule, tribal warfare, and border problems seemed endemic in the Middle East, Africa, and along India's northwest frontier. The expense of large ground-force expeditions to maintain order in the empire was becoming increasingly burdensome. During the early 1920s, the British began to search out alternatives to these costly expeditions.

At that time the fledgling Royal Air Force, drastically reduced in size following the armistice, was being eyed hungrily by the senior services, which had never really approved the creation of a new service from their air arms.⁴ Thus, it faced both a threat and an

opportunity: the threat was to its very existence and originated in the postwar struggle for resources between the three services; the opportunity was to develop a better way to control and administer the empire. The challenge then was to make itself indispensable to the country as a separate unified service. Since the only immediate requirement for military force was in the colonies, the Royal Air Force needed to develop the methods and means whereby its aircraft could be used as a cheap, effective force to control the empire.

The first indication that the British Air Force could deal effectively with a colonial disturbance was the successful operation of "Z" unit in British Somaliland in 1920. This was a campaign against Mohammed bin Abdullah Hassan, the Mad Mullah, who had been pillaging the eastern tip of Africa since 1899; and who had been evading punitive operations by regular British army units and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudanese Army for more than 15 years.⁵ The inability of ground forces to stop the Mullah and his dervishes from overrunning the country led to a cabinet decision to use air power against the brigand and his large following.

A self-contained RAF expedition, code-named Unit Z, was organized and equipped for a six-month-long campaign. The unit had 12 de Havilland 9a aircraft, ten Ford trucks, two Ford ambulances, six trailers, two motorcycles, two Crosley light trucks, 36 officers and 183 men.⁶ By New Year's Day of 1920, Z Force had built a temporary airdrome at Berbera and were assembling their aircraft, which had been delivered by ship. By 19 January all aircraft had been assembled and flight tested.⁷ The RAF's plan was simple: bomb the Mullah's forts

and pursue his bands wherever they could be found, driving them toward the resident ground forces stationed in the area.

The first raid, carried out by six aircraft, almost ended the war. A bomb blast nearly killed the Mullah, but he was saved by a fortuitously placed camel. Further raids, resulting in heavy casualties, took place over the next two days and caused the dervishes to retreat. Somaliland Field Forces were positioned to block the retreat while the Royal Air Force switched to a supporting role of maintaining communications between the various ground force detachments, providing air cover, and evacuating the wounded. The aircraft proved eminently successful in dislodging the Mullah and his followers from their forts and driving them toward the ground forces which were able to neutralize the Mullah and his band of men. The campaign against the Mullah lasted only three weeks and cost about 77,000 pounds, a considerable saving over the campaign proposed by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff. He had estimated that it would take 12 months and two divisions to do the job plus an additional expenditure running into millions of pounds to build the railways, roads, and garrison bases necessary to maintain the peace.⁸

The experience in Somaliland showed that there was some justification for Winston Churchill's declaration in December 1913 that "the first duty of the RAF is to garrison the British Empire."⁹ As Minister of War and Air, he had been behind Air Chief Marshal Hugh Trenchard's plan to use air power in Somaliland. By 1920, Churchill had asked Trenchard to plan a much more ambitious project, to control Mesopotamia (Iraq) by air.¹⁰ The British were, at the time, nurturing

a new Arab government in Iraq, a government not popular among the Arab tribes populating the country. These tribes seemed totally unimpressed with British-sponsored progressive government, which included rules about taxation and standards of acceptable behavior. In late 1920, a serious rebellion against British rule was in progress; the 80 British and Indian battalions (120,000 troops) garrisoning the country were being hard pressed to maintain order. An additional 15,414 men sent from India were quickly absorbed in trying to control an insurrection of at least 131,000 armed men.¹¹ The British forces were scattered throughout the country, protecting population centers and vulnerable lines of communication. With simultaneous outbreaks of violence in several areas, the British force proved too weak in any single spot to deal effectively with the problem. Even with 63 aircraft working with the army, putting down the 1920 insurrection in Iraq was a costly business: about 38 million pounds.¹²

In March 1921, with Iraq still restive and unrest simmering in much of the Arab world, the British held a conference in Cairo to discuss the Middle East situation. Winston Churchill, by then Colonial Secretary, chaired the meeting which was attended by all three service chiefs. They decided that Iraq, their biggest trouble spot, was to be placed under the control of the Royal Air Force, and the progress made in using air power for colonial control in Somaliland would be developed into an operational concept for the RAF. The army began to withdraw from Iraq during the summer of 1922, leaving behind four battalions of British and Indian troops and three

armored car companies. Air Marshal Sir John Salmond was made commander in chief of this force plus eight squadrons of aircraft. He was the first air force officer to have complete military command of a colonial territory.¹³ Salmond's command faced both an internal and external threat. The former involved obstreperous tribes that rejected the central control of King Feisal, the British-sponsored ruler of Iraq; the latter, encroachments by Turkish irregular (and some regular) forces concentrated in northeast Iraq that were intent on claiming the Mosul valley area of Iraq for Turkey. In the early days of air control, these problems were dealt with by the rather straightforward method of delivering an ultimatum and then bombing the culprits. But as the Royal Air Force became more experienced in using aircraft to maintain order in places such as Iran, Somaliland, Aden, the Sudan, India's northwest frontier, Palestine, and Transjordan, the concept of air control became much more sophisticated.

Air Control: From Concept to Doctrine

During this period, Royal Air Force officers began to amass a substantial body of knowledge on what worked and what did not when using air power to police the empire. By the mid-1930s, that knowledge had been codified and was being taught at the RAF Staff College and the Imperial Defence College.¹⁴

Before air control came onto the scene, the British had been using ground forces to control the empire for generations. Essentially, the British had developed two types of operations: the punitive expedition followed by withdrawing the troops to some

centralized base, the so-called "burn and scuttle" technique, and an expedition followed by military occupation. There were many obvious difficulties with the army method of control. Paramount was the expense of mounting and maintaining a large expeditionary force. Because of the cost, expeditions could be sent out only rarely and then only when the need for action had been demonstrated repeatedly. The aim of those expeditions was to administer a major defeat to discourage further undesirable behavior by forcing guerrilla fighters or nomadic tribesmen to concentrate and face British regiments. Usually, the British entered and partially destroyed villages to provoke a major battle with the insurgents. However, these campaigns in distant and often harsh areas were hard on British troops with numerous losses due to disease. And the desired political effect was often superficial and transitory. As soon as the punitive column withdrew, the chastised offenders would begin planning new activity against established authority.

There were other problems with the army method. The columns of punitive expeditions took an agonizingly long time to reach their targets. Thus, the effect of prompt reprisal for a specific act was lost. Further, if a punitive column became a permanent occupying force, its mere presence often became a cause for friction between the local inhabitants and the occupiers. Clearly, the army approach had little subtlety about it. It involved moving masses of troops, engaging the enemy, crushing him, and occupying his territory. While subtlety of action is not normally associated with air power, the air control tactics developed by the RAF included some surprisingly subtle techniques.

The doctrine supporting air control operations was exceedingly pragmatic and provided guidance on both goals and techniques. In speaking to the RAF Staff College in 1936, Wing Commander (later Air Chief Marshal) R. H. M. S. Saundby repeatedly emphasized that the purpose of air control was "to support the political authorities in their tasks of pacification or administration." Because of the political nature of the goal, political authority had to be supreme in these operations. To be successful, the military commander had to cooperate closely with the relevant political authority: ". . . they must understand each other and appreciate each other's point of view properly."¹⁵

Since the objective of most air control operations was long-term political stability, pacification, and administration, the techniques for achieving those goals were contrary to the training and natural inclination of most military men: the military defeat of the enemy. The guiding doctrine for designing air control operations was the notion that operations would cause the enemy to submit with the minimum loss of people and material on both sides. Thus, operations were aimed primarily at the morale of those who were disturbing the peace, not by destroying the people or terrifying them into submission but rather by disrupting their normal routines to such an extent that continued hostilities became undesirable. As it turned out, the policy of minimal violence proved much more effective (and much cheaper) than the "burn and scuttle" policy of punitive expeditions by ground forces.

For example, the future leader of the Royal Air Force in World War II, Charles F. A. Portal, wrote about an experience he had in Aden in 1935 that illustrated practical techniques supporting the doctrinal

precept of minimal violence.¹⁶ His application of air control doctrine began when a caravan en route to Aden from Yemen was raided by the Quteibis tribe in the mountains north of the port of Aden. Portal drafted an ultimatum that was straightforward enough: pay a fine for damages incurred and hand over the raiders. It then stated the consequences for not complying with the ultimatum:

If you do not produce the fine and the men, you must leave all your villages and fields, taking all your property and animals with you, and keep right away until the Government gives you permission to come back. The Government will do this as soon as you have complied with the terms, your villages and fields may be bombed or fired on at any time by day or night, and you are particularly warned not to touch any bombs that do not go off, as if you do so you will probably get killed.¹⁷

The last section of the ultimatum outlined the concept of an "inverted blockade" that became the standard method for dealing with similar situations elsewhere in the empire.

The air blockade in this case went on for two months. The tribe went through three phases during the blockade: at first, excited and boastful, shooting freely at the airplanes; next, internal squabbling; and, finally, boredom as they stayed away from their homes and fields and grew concerned about getting their crops planted. They then began to make peace overtures to the government. Portal noted that the most remarkable aspect of this air control operation was the way the tribe came back under government jurisdiction with practically no ill-will, a phenomenon that had also been observed in India and Iraq. The reason for this, at least in part, was the relatively few casualties that resulted from the operation. In Portal's words:

. . . it would be the greatest mistake to believe that a victory which spares the lives and feelings of the losers

need be any less permanent or salutary than one which inflicts heavy losses on the fighting men and results in a peace dictated on a stricken field.¹⁸

The Requirements of British Air Control

From experience the British learned that in applying air power to a specific situation, their air forces had to satisfy certain operational requirements to attain a satisfactory political solution by the minimum use of force. These requirements, of necessity, became critical tenets in the British doctrine of air control. Foremost among these was the need to have a detailed knowledge of the culture, leaders, method of living, and state of mind of the target people. This intelligence was necessary for early warnings of brewing trouble; when action had to be taken, this intelligence made it a great deal simpler to determine the decisive points at which to apply pressure.

Excellent intelligence also enabled the Royal Air Force to avoid attacking people not directly involved--an important requirement in a constabulary-type operation. The Royal Air Force had its own well-trained intelligence officers and civilian political officers on hand to build the necessary intelligence networks.¹⁹ The Royal Air Force required them to become expert in their area of responsibility and to maintain the "closest possible touch with tribes and tribal leaders and with their social and political activities."²⁰

To disseminate this intelligence effectively required a well-organized and efficient communications system. During the air control era, the British made good use of wireless telegraphy sets to keep intelligence and political officers in the field in constant touch with the air staff headquarters and higher-level political authorities.

One drawback of wireless communication, even in the 1920s and '30s, was the problem of shifting the responsibility for action from the man in the field to higher-level decision-makers at home. One of the doctrinal tenets of air control was that the authority to act must be delegated to the on-the-scene commander.²¹ The Royal Air Force had learned that procrastination in acting had often been interpreted by recalcitrant tribes as weakness by the government. Good intelligence, effective communications, and the authority to act enabled RAF commanders to deal with trouble at its earliest stages and greatly increased the likelihood of success in air control operations.

Writers of British air control doctrine also provided guidance on dealing with the enemy throughout the campaign. A prime requirement, at the outset, was establishing clearly understood terms. The British made sure that tribal leaders and as many tribesmen as possible understood why the government was taking action and knew exactly what they had to do before the government would end the operation. The British took care to ensure that it was a simple matter for the tribesmen to submit to the will of the government. Not only did the British maintain constant contact with the enemy throughout a campaign but they also delivered propaganda by aircraft-borne loudspeaker. This propaganda emphasized the peaceful intent of the British demands and stressed the futility of resistance against the impersonal, invulnerable, and ubiquitous air force. Psychological warfare was tailored to create a sense of helplessness among the target people and was an integral part of air control operations. Coupled with the "inverted blockade," psychological warfare proved useful in air control operations.

A final aspect of British air control operations was built on the overriding air control principle of minimal violence. After a successful air control campaign, it was essential to use the aircraft as a means of positive contact with the former enemy: doctors were flown to remote sites when needed, natives were evacuated to large medical facilities if required, messages were delivered from one local chief to another in the course of normal flying duties, and similar acts of good faith were performed. This type of humanitarian work helped enormously in reintegrating formerly rebellious tribes back into the fold of law-abiding citizens and showed them benefits that could result by accepting British control.²²

Air Control and Today's US Air Force

Most who have looked at the British experience with air control have concluded that the simple applications of that concept are gone forever.²³ Technology and the arms bazaar can provide even the smallest insurgent group with sophisticated surface-to-air missiles and antiaircraft artillery. Clearly, the nearly unchallenged operating environment enjoyed by the British in the pre-World War II British Empire no longer exists. American public opinion, rightfully concerned about another Vietnam disaster, makes any discussion of applying US power in small wars very unpopular. In spite of those obvious limiting technical and political factors, there is something for our Air Force to learn from Britain's air control experience.

Perhaps the most important lesson we can extract from this phase of Royal Air Force history is that air power can be shaped in creative

ways for effective political results. The methods used by the British to achieve simple solutions were not all that simple, at least as the doctrine involved grew with experience. It took a very sophisticated combination of superb intelligence, communications, and psychological warfare coupled with a judicious application of firepower to achieve the desired outcome: pacification of a troubled colonial area with minimum violence, lasting results, and minimum cost. To design such a program required a flexibility of thinking that was most impressive. Airmen emerging from World War I with their experience of fleets of aircraft being used for bombing and air-to-air missions were able to modify their concepts of air power to apply it to a totally new environment with a totally new mission. While they were developing these new concepts, Britain's air officers quickly learned the political nature of military power. They participated in the political process of formulating plans of action that meshed political goals and military capability--training that stood in good stead during World War II.

Technology, of course, played a key role in the success of Britain's air control concept. There was a mystique about the aircraft in relation to the people being controlled. The aircraft was seen as an impersonal, invulnerable projection of British power that could apply firepower with extreme precision and overcome physical obstacles quickly. These characteristics made air power in underdeveloped areas an almost irresistible force.

Modern technology may give today's air power some of the same characteristics that made Britain's de Havilland 9a's such an effective

weapon for policing the empire in the 1920s and 1930s. Modern aircraft equipped with long-range, highly accurate standoff weapons could play an important role in supporting Third World friends or pursuing limited military objectives in small wars. For instance, it could be in the interests of the United States to assist a friendly country facing a threat of an external foe's sophisticated surface-to-air missiles. Long-range, standoff US aircraft could jam or eliminate the SAM threat from areas far from the battlefield. Another example would be if an aggressive, expansionistic Third World nation were to mass troops and equipment on the border of a country the United States wished to support. A demonstration of American ability to locate and destroy some of the massed equipment using weapons far beyond the range of the aggressor's defensive systems might prove to be an effective deterrent measure when diplomacy failed to keep the peace. If weapons are ever placed in space, of course, the concept of using standoff, precise firepower assumes a much wider dimension. However, the United States needs to have a concept of operations and a doctrine for their use before they can be produced and deployed.

The idea of participating in small wars has been so repugnant in recent years that methods, means, and doctrines for doing so have been ignored. Hence, the United States has failed to develop a credible American capability for achieving limited political goals (using military instruments) in areas of the world that are becoming increasingly important. To correct that failure would involve a debate on the need for new ideas about US participation in small wars. That debate could provide the basic rationale for reversing a major legacy

of the Vietnam era: the public perception that any American military involvement must inevitably lead to large-scale US intervention with ground forces and to an interminable war.

The Air Force should seek a major role in developing the concepts and doctrines for US participation in small wars. Unfortunately, the concentration of energy on developing forces for the high-technology, high-intensity central European battlefield and for a large-scale intervention in the Persian Gulf region has diverted thought from developing the doctrine and means for using air power in small wars. Efforts to develop Air Force ability to participate in wars at the lower end of the conflict spectrum, from peacekeeping to supporting a threatened friend to actual intervention, could lead US decision makers to consider air power as a worthwhile policy option in the Third World. It behooves us in the Air Force to consider seriously the capabilities and doctrine relative to small wars, which the Royal Air Force developed when air power was still very young, to see if we can do it as effectively as the British did so many years ago.

NOTES

1. Morris Janowitz, The Professional Soldier (New York: Glencoe Free Press, 1960), 418.
2. There is considerable debate on US and USAF capability to participate in low-intensity war both in terms of military organization and equipment and in public support for such endeavors. Perhaps the best collection of ideas and analysis on the subject is Sam Sarkesian and William Scully US Policy and Low-Intensity Conflict: Potentials for Military Struggles in the 1980s (New York: National Strategy Information Center, 1981).
3. Royal Air Force Staff Memorandum No. 52, Air Ministry, June 1933, 3.
4. See Cabinet Paper 365(29). "The Fuller Employment of Air Power in Imperial Defence," December 1929, for a brief outline of Army-Navy attempts to dismember the RAF from 1919 to 1929.
5. C. G. Grey, A History of the Air Ministry (London: Unwin Brothers, 1940), 173.
6. Flight Lieutenant F. A. Skoulding, "With Z Unit in Somaliland," The Royal Air Force Quarterly, July 1930, 390.
7. Ibid., 392.
8. Charles Sims, The Royal Air Force: The First Fifty Years (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1963), 38.
9. Ibid., 37.
10. Martin Gilbert, Winston Churchill: The Stricken World (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 216-18.

11. Flight Lieutenant M. Thomas, "The Royal Air Force in Iraq since 1918," a lecture given at the RAF Staff College, Andover, England, 1923.

12. N. N. Golovine, "Air Strategy" (London: Gae and Polden, 1936), 24.

13. Sims, 39-40.

14. Air Vice Marshal F. R. Ludow-Hewitt, Air Staff Memorandum No. 52 "Air Control," a lecture by the Deputy Chief of the Air Staff at the Imperial Defence College, London, April 1933; and Wing Commander R. H. M. S. Saundby, Lecture on "Small Wars with Particular Reference to Air Control in Undeveloped Countries," RAF Staff College, 14th Course, Andover, England, June 1936.

15. Saundby, 16.

16. Air Commodore C. F. A. Portal, "Air Force Cooperation in Policing the Empire," Royal United Service Institution Journal, May 1937, 341-58.

17. Ibid., 352.

18. Ibid., 354.

19. For an eminently readable example of how the Royal Air Force developed and used intelligence in an air control operation, see John B. Glubb, War in the Desert: An R.A.F. Frontier Campaign (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960).

20. Saundby, 20.

21. Saundby, 6.

22. Portal, 356-57.

23. See Lieutenant Colonel Bryce Poe II, "The Role of Aerospace Attack Weapons in International Affairs," an unpublished research paper for the National War College, Washington, D.C., 1965.